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This paper discusses various views of the nature of geography and its place in the public schools; sketches the current role of geography in the K-12 curriculum; and offers suggestions for policy and practices in geographic education. Recent criticism in the media of U.S. students' geographic illiteracy is noted; it is pointed out, however, that geographic literacy encompasses more than memorizing place names. Global education for the public schools with an interdisciplinary, inquiry approach is advocated. However, inadequate teacher preparation, restrictive curriculum rules, and the recent emphasis on testing narrowly defined skills may be impediments to this goal. (NL)

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WHAT IS THE CAPITAL OF THE STATE OF CHAOS? GEOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses various views of the nature of geography and its place in the public schools, sketches the current role of geography in the K-12 curriculum (particularly in Texas), and offers some suggestions for policy and practices in geographic education. The author notes recent criticism in the media of American students' geographic illiteracy, but argues that geographic literacy consists of more than memorizing place names. He advocates global education for the public schools with an interdisciplinary, inquiry approach, but points out that inadequate teacher preparation, restrictive curriculum rules, and the recent emphasis on testing narrowly defined skills may be impediments to this goal.

WHAT IS THE CAPITAL OF THE STATE OF CHAOS?
GEOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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In How To Survive In Your Native Land, a personal view of the shortcomings of American education, teacher James Herndon (1971) said that most schooling is about flax. Recalling his own school days, he remembers memorizing the names of countries that grew flax, coloring maps that showed flax-producing regions, drawing a legend that alerted the reader to those flax-rich areas, and so on. Exactly what flax is or why it is important to know about it were always hazy notions in Herndon's mind, though. Certainly he never actually saw or touched any flax. That was too much to hope for. As a teacher, he saw the same thing in the curriculum--too many trivial facts unrelated to students' lives. It is interesting that Herndon chose geography as the epitome of what he saw as a main weakness of our schools. Has the status of geography in elementary and secondary schools changed much in the almost two decades since Herndon's lament? Not a great deal, I am afraid. In this paper, I will discuss various views of the nature of geography and its place in the public school curriculum, sketch the current role of geography in k-12 education (particulalry in Texas), and offer some suggestions for policy and practices in geographic education.

Americans seem to give lip service to the importance of geographic education, particularly when some new survey is published showing that an embarrassingly high proportion of our college students cannot locate Tacoma or think Urals is an antonym for "ours". Distress over our geographical ignorance is not new. In 1960, James High noted, with admitted nostalgia, the passing of place name drill in geography. For the vast majority of students then entering college, he asserted, " -- geography will be a new experience and they will discover with dismay that their ignorance is appalling."(p.278) High observed the increasing tendency in elementary schools, the traditional home of geographical education, to fuse geography with the social studies. While pleased with the trend of accepting geography as an important part of the social studies and not exclusively an elementary school subject, High was concerned that geography must find "a respectable place" in the curriculum lest it be lost in the shuffle. Nearly thirty years later, Joseph Cirrincione and Richard Farrel (1988) expressed the same concern, arguing that geography should be taught as a separate course. At the same time Salvatore Natoli (1988) noted the "fifty year decline in the teaching of geography as a separate course," adding that many universities have phased out geography departments. (p.1)

When discussing public education in the United States, it is important to remember that this country has no nationally-determined curriculum. Each state has

established its own system of public education and, to varying degrees, determines the curriculum. It is reasonable to say, though, that in most elementary schools, geography is now subsumed under the rubric of social studies, and that the social studies curriculum usually employs the "expanding circles" approach, popular for some seventy years. Typically, kindergarten social studies focuses on self and home, first grade on families, second grade on neighborhoods, third on communities, fourth on state history and geography, fifth on U. S. history, and sixth on world cultures. (Lengel & Superka, 1982) In many states, seventh grade social studies consists of a world history/world cultures course, but there is variation. Texas, for example, requires a full year of Texas history and geography in the seventh grade, with the emphasis on history.(Texas Education Agency, 1984) As High (1960) noted, geography curriculum often has a very local flavor! Most states require two years of U. S. history at the secondary level with another required unit of social studies, often American government and/or economics. World history is widely offered in high schools, but often as an elective. The same is true for world geography in most senior highs, but from my observations, it is chosen much less frequently than world history. Unfortunately, in some high schools, world geography seems to be a repository for less able, less motivated students. In summary, geography

does not seem to be a particularly salient part of the curriculum.

Teachers would probably answer the above charge by saying that geography is taught in all subjects. They have maps and globes in their classrooms and they teach map skills, but as Natoli (1988) points out, most teachers are not well prepared academically to teach geography. Mary Eslinger and Douglas Superka (1982) discovered that elementary teachers feel more qualified to teach reading and math than social studies and science. This is not surprising since they are required to spend far more time teaching reading and math. At the secondary level, many history, government, and economics teachers have never had a college geography course. Even teachers with "broad-field social studies" or "composite social studies" certificates, which allow them to teach any secondary social studies course, may have had only limited exposure to geography.

Perhaps curriculum developers and teachers have some difficulty in dealing with geography because it cuts across several disciplines. From its inception with Eratosthenes and Ptolemy through the work of Von Humboldt and Ritter in the 19th century to modern geography, the field has dealt with both the familiar and the exotic, the tangible and the abstract, the physical world as well as human beings and their activities. (Banks, 1985) Geographers may conduct their research under the sea, on mountain tops, in rural

hamlets, or in urban slums. Their tools may include a tape recorder or a transit, a satellite-borne camera or a statistical analysis computer program. Is there, in fact, really a separate discipline with a unique content that can be distinguished as geography ? Natoli (1988) goes so far as to say, "Geography is defined not so much by the objects it studies as the methods and tools it uses." (p.3) But most writers agree that the distinguishing feature of geography is its emphasis on place.(Banks, 1985; Nelson, 1987; Bacon, 1981) "Geography is a place-based discipline," says Philip Bacon, "in the same way history is a time-based discipline."(p.52) Whether this strict separation is possible or even desirable is open to debate. Barry's three-dimensional Geographical Matrix (Beaumont & Williams, 1983) is an intriguing model for the examination of a place and its attributes over time, and even Bacon (1981) quotes a caveat from the Jacobean geographer, Peter Heylyn, with wry humor: "As Geography without History, hath life and motion, but at randome, & unstable: so History without Geography, like a dead carkasse hath neither life nor motion at all." (p. 52)

James Banks (1985) describes the five main traditions or approaches to geography. The Physical Geography Tradition emphasizes geology, meteorology, oceanography, etc., subjects often dealt with in secondary school physical science courses. The work of globe-trotting explorers is an

important part of this tradition. The approach is largely descriptive. In Cultural Geography (or the Man-Land Tradition), the focus is on the realtionships between humans and their environment. This tradition is sometimes called human or ecological geography. Regional Geography or Area Studies is a tradition often found in the middle-grades curriculum. Here the emphasis is on the holistic study of a homogeneous area. Homogeneity may be defined in different ways, such as location and landforms , culture and economic activity, or political boundaries. This tradition strives for an inclusive, comprehensive rendering of a region with an examination of key features and their relation to other features, internal and external. The Spatial Geography or Location Theory Tradition is concerned with locations and patterns of distribution of people and activities. Cartography and geodetic survey are part of this tradition. Spatial geographers may study urban spatial use, or investigate the interaction of a cluster of variables with economic activity. They are more likely to use quantitative data and advanced statistical analysis rather than the descriptive methods of regional geography. Finally, the Historical-Geography Tradition combines the above traditions (primarily the cultural and regional) with <u>time</u>. While an historian may see the return of Lenin to Russia in 1917 as a key event in the history of the Bolshevik Revolution, an historical geographer may be more concerned with the

elimination of private land holding and the development of collective farms in the 1920s as a significant change in the geography of Russia. Banks sees value in an eclectic approach to geography education, recognizing that some of the five traditions are more appropriate for certain age groups than others. (Banks, 1985, p.262)

We cannot decide which geographical tradition or traditions are most appropriate for the public schools unless we also decide the purpose of geography in the curriculum. Why should children and adolescents study geography? Is it to help them do well on tests that compare them to Swedish and Japanese students? Do we merely want our children to avoid embarrassment in conversations and to appear "culturally literate"? Natoli (1988) asserts that while we <u>are</u> geographically illiterate, the measures often cited are too simple. Knowledge of place names is not geographic literacy. "Geographic literacy is attained only when people understand why places are the way they are, what these places are like, and how they relate to other people."(p. 2) Similarly, Bacon (1981) has argued against the arid accumulation of facts in the geography curriculum with little if any attention to a conceptual framework. "It is possible to collect facts without thinking," he says, "but it is impossible to think without collecting facts."(p.53) Banks (1985) also stresses the importance of inquiry and decision-making in geography education rather

than the mere memorization of facts, a key tenet of the "new social studies". Facts take on meaning and connectedness in light of basic concepts and generalizations. But to what end?

Perhaps the strongest argument for a vital, multi-faceted geography component in our public school curriculum is the growing interrelatedness of nations, people, and institutions and the increasing, often deleterious, effect of human activity on our lands, oceans, and atmoshpere. Over the last decade and a half, the concept of "global education" has gained acceptance with curriculum developers and social studies organizations. In its "Position Statement on Global Education," the National Council for the Social Studies (1982) said, "World problems are American problems. -- [C]itizens [need] to possess the knowledge and sensitivity required to comprehend the global dimensions of political, economic and cultural phenomena." (p.36) Students need to understand the relationships between social, political, and ecological realities and should examine alternative futures. They should develop global awareness, understand global interdependence, and gain cross-cultural understanding. (Johnson & Benegan, 1983) Geography professor Philip Bacon (1981) put the case for global education poetically when he said, "Our planet is tiny and fragile amidst the expanse of space."

Proponents of global education argue that it may be integrated into the existing curriculum and point to a variety of curriculum materials that have been developed. There are some roadblocks to this, however. First is the hesitance of state boards of education to arouse the ire of some citizens who may see global education as questionably ideological, though its advocates deny this. Second, states have increasingly prescribed curriculum during the last few years of educational reform. The direction of this reform has generally been of the "back-to-basics,let's-get-tougher" approach. The problem with this trend is that it usually does not encourage the innovative, interdisciplinary approaches that global education would require. The state-mandated curriculum rules in Texas, known popularly as the Essential Elements, are among the most detailed in the nation, delineating what content teachers must cover in every grade and every course. Teachers have little if any time to teach knowledge and skills not prescribed in the Essential Elements. For example, the rules require a strong emphasis on reading and mathematics skills, dictating that the majority of instructional time in elementary grades be spent on those areas, with the minimum number of minutes specified. In the social studies, the Essential Elements seem more often than not to take the "transmission of values" approach rather than a social science inquiry approach or a reflective, decision-making, change-oriented

approach. For example, of the thirty-nine social studies values, attitudes, and citizenship skills for middle school, ten fall under the heading, "Support the American economic system," and include such objectives as, "Support the role of profit in the American market system." None of the thirty-nine are related to world geography or global education. The kind of political trade-offs and fence-sitting that go into curriculum documents such as this can be seen with humorous effect in the objective, "Support the democratic processes of the republican form of government." (Texas Education Agency, 1984, p. 83-84)

Third, there is evidence that teachers may not be adequately prepared to take on a global studies approach to geography, or even to strengthen geography in their current social studies teaching, though they seem quite willing to do so. Farrell and Cirrincione (1988) surveyed a nation-wide stratified random sample of 1138 social studies teachers in grades 6-12, asking them to rate the importance of the Five Fundamental Themes advanced by the National Commission for Geographic Education in 1982 :

1. Location, absolute and relative. 2. Place, physical and human characteristics. 3. Relationships within places, humans and environments. 4. Movement, humans interacting on the earth. 5. Regions, how they form and change.

Somewhat surprisingly, the teachers rated location and regions lower than movement and relationships, but the results, say Farrell and Cirrincione, "raise more questions than they answer."(p.122) Noting that the teachers responded favorably to all the themes and evinced a desire to emphasize them in their teaching, the authors comment, "The apparent lack of discrimination in the ratings of the themes may create problems for curriculum developers. This favorable but indiscriminate response could indicate a critical dilemma facing social studies teachers. They see the need to expand the role of geography in the curriculum, but lack the training to identify clear areas of need and to define what that role should be."(p.122)

I believe that in order to strengthen geography education in our schools, we must first provide better pre-service and in-service education for teachers in geography with an emphasis on global education. Unfortunately, teacher education is a political football as well, and its own curriculum has been squeezed, stuffed, and cut to fit prevailing trends in state legislatures. Nevertheless, we must assure that all elementary teachers and secondary social studies teachers have the breadth of knowledge and a pedagogical repertoire to help their students understand the relations of humans to their environments and the increasing interrelatedness and interdependence of cultures, nations, and organizations.

Obviously this must involve learning places and names, but not merely as ends in themselves.

Even well-prepared teachers, however, cannot overcome restrictive, unimaginative, parochial curriculum rules. The best geography education would combine the local, through student projects and research in their community, with the global in a future-oriented, interdisciplinary curriculum. Though professional organizations and leading social studies educators call for these strategies, the current educational climate in the states does not appear to be favorable toward them. The recent drive for excellence through reform has too often manifested itself as an exclusive concern with the narrow measurment of skills by standardized tests. Fortunately, educational trends and policies can be changed. Those interested in improving geographic education in our elementary and secondary schools must be persistent and persuasive.

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